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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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IMPLICATIONS OF SOVIET SA-5 UNITS IN SYRIA

Summary

We have strong reason to believe the Soviets are now sending air defense personnel to Syria to man the two SA-5 complexes being established there. We also believe that it is likely that Moscow's military presence in Syria will extend beyond the SA-5 units, themselves, although evidence for this is circumstantial at the moment. We anticipate that the Soviets will operate early warning and low-altitude air defense systems protecting the SA-5 sites, play a greater role in Syria's air defense in general, and possibly deploy a contingent of their own fighter aircraft. [REDACTED]

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The introduction of the SA-5 system reflects a qualitative increase in Moscow's commitment to Syria. By deploying a system that can challenge Israel's air superiority, the Soviets are tying their prestige more closely than ever to Syria's military fortunes and are running a far greater risk of being drawn into Syrian-Israeli hostilities. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was prepared by the Current Support, Theater Forces and Strategic Forces Divisions of the Office of Soviet Analysis, with a contribution from the Defensive Systems Division of the Office of Scientific and Weapons Research. It has been coordinated with the Office of Near East/South Asia Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Director, Office of Soviet Analysis, [REDACTED]

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The move is apparently designed to reverse the setback the Soviets suffered as a result of last summer's Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when the USSR was reduced to the role of an ineffectual bystander and Soviet weaponry was discredited. It appears aimed at regaining for Moscow a position of influence in the region, countering the US military presence there and thwarting Washington's current dominance of the Arab-Israeli peace process. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Motivations

Israel's thrashing of Syria's Soviet-equipped forces in Lebanon last June and the perception in Damascus that Moscow responded ineffectively strained relations between the USSR and Syria and damaged Soviet prestige internationally. Moscow felt compelled to reply to the widespread criticism of its weaponry by publishing an unusual defense of Soviet arms. In the face of these challenges, the Soviets evidently concluded last summer that restoring both their credibility and the relationship with their most important ally in the Middle East warranted a substantially greater military commitment to Syria. [REDACTED]

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The Syrian air defense network has been the focus of Soviet efforts. Since last summer Moscow has delivered an array of its most advanced air defense equipment, along with additional advisers technicians and, now, operational units. The SA-5 is the latest component of this comprehensive upgrading of the Syrian air defense network. [REDACTED]

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The Soviet leaders, by introducing the SA-5 and--we believe--their own personnel to man it, probably want to send a message to:

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|--------------------|--|
| <u>Syria</u> | -- That they are determined to bolster its military capability against the Israelis and are willing to stand beside it in the defense of Syrian air space. |
| <u>Other Arabs</u> | -- That the USSR is a reliable ally and an effective counterweight to Israel and the US. |
| <u>Israel</u> | -- That it can no longer attack with impunity Soviet allies in the Middle East. |
| <u>The US</u> | -- That it should rein in the Israelis and take notice that the Soviet Union intends to play a major role in the region. |

Friend and
foe alike

-- That Soviet weaponry, contrary to the negative reporting it received last summer, deserves a healthy respect. [REDACTED]

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We believe Moscow's primary goal is to refurbish its credentials--severely tarnished by its inaction in the Lebanese crisis--as a power to be contended with in the Middle East. The Soviets probably view their establishment of a greater military presence in Syria as a counter to US military involvement in Lebanon and in the Sinai Peninsula. Moscow views both US contingents as "bridgeheads" for American military intervention throughout the Middle East. The Kremlin presumably hopes that its move will hinder the realization of US-sponsored Lebanese and Arab-Israeli peace settlements. It may calculate that increased Soviet backing for Syria will make Jordan's King Hussein and PLO chief Arafat think twice about pursuing a peace formula--based on President Reagan's initiative--that Damascus opposes. The Soviets probably also hope that, ultimately, their action will force the US to deal with the USSR as an equal in the Middle East. In short, Moscow is seeking to be a power that, once again, must be negotiated with in determining any Middle East settlement. [REDACTED]

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To the Syrian audience, the SA-5 is a particularly persuasive means of demonstrating Moscow's commitment. It enables the Soviets to claim that they have offered up a system that plays a critical role in their own homeland defense, that the Syrians are the first recipients of the system, and that its long range capability addresses a significant gap in Syrian air defenses. [REDACTED]

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Although we estimate that the SA-5 has the capability to engage high-flying Israeli targets over Lebanon and northern Israel, we have no evidence as to the actual engagement guidelines under which Soviet troops will operate. It is possible that the Soviets may commit themselves only to the defense of Syria, in which case they would aim to avoid becoming involved in a limited Israeli-Syrian air clash over Lebanon and almost certainly would not initiate hostilities. Should the Soviets decide to include Lebanese airspace in their air defense umbrella and fire on Israeli aircraft there in case of another major Syrian-Israeli conflict, they will invite an Israeli attack on the complexes, with the attendant risk of further escalation.

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The Soviet Role


Several factors have led us to our judgment that the SA-5 complexes at Homs and Dumayr will be operated by Soviet personnel:

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The decision to deploy the SA-5 units to Syria was probably made about the time Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Marshal Ogarkov, visited the country in late July.

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Soviet actions in Egypt in 1970 during the War of Attrition raise the possibility that the Soviets will also deploy a contingent of their own fighter aircraft to Syria to support the air defense operation. In their decision to send SA-3 units to Egypt at that time, the Soviets viewed the deployment of their own fighters as a necessary part of the package. They would probably restrict their flight activity to the interior of Syria. Some 60 aircraft were involved in the Egyptian deployment, and a similar number could be sent to Syria. If this has been part of Moscow's decision, the aircraft should be delivered shortly, since the Soviets would probably want the aircraft combat-ready by the time the missile sites are operational.



Response to an Israeli Attack

Moscow has probably calculated that Israel will be deterred from a preemptive strike against the SA-5s by the Soviet military presence and the political costs of such an unprovoked attack on Syrian territory.

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At the same time, Soviet leaders had to calculate that there would be a high risk of an Israeli attack, and they almost certainly have made contingency plans.

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As was the case in Egypt during the War of Attrition, we do not expect the Soviets to announce the presence of their own forces in Syria. Soviet proclamations instead will emphasize that Moscow's aid has been restricted to the legitimate self-defense needs of Syria. This policy offers a degree of flexibility that would not be available if the honor of the Soviet Armed Forces were publicly placed on the line. [REDACTED]

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If the Israelis were to strike the SA-5 units but the attack failed to destroy the complexes or resulted in significant Israeli losses, Moscow could claim a victory. In this case, the Soviets probably would quickly replace any destroyed equipment. [REDACTED]

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A strike that destroyed the SA-5s with few Israeli losses would be an acute embarrassment for the Kremlin, even though the resultant increase in tensions would probably achieve one of the Soviet goals--further discrediting the US in Arab eyes and derailing US-sponsored Lebanese and Arab-Israeli peace settlements. The Soviets would mount a vigorous political campaign to encourage international outrage over the Israeli move and divert attention from their own military failure. But in order to avoid a collapse of its credibility in the Middle East, we believe that Moscow would have to rebuild the complexes and bolster their capability to withstand attack. This likely would include strengthening the low-altitude air defense sites around the SA-5s and, if they have not already done so, having Soviet fighter units defend the complexes. This level of augmented defenses, however, probably would not be sufficient to prevent determined Israeli follow-on strikes from again knocking out the SA-5 system. But the Soviets might calculate that the Israelis would not continue to pay the high military and political price of the repeated attacks that would be necessary to keep the system suppressed. [REDACTED]

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At the same time, we believe there is at least an even chance that Moscow would try to go beyond these steps in response to a successful Israeli attack against the complexes and, similar to its experience in Egypt in 1970, assume a more direct role in running the entire Syrian air defense network. This act would probably be accompanied by the introduction of substantially more SA-5 units and assets for their protection. [REDACTED]

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Implications

Beyond the obvious risks of an Israeli attack on the SA-5 complexes, the Soviet move has broader implications. [REDACTED]

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It has seriously complicated the achievement both of a withdrawal of foreign forces from Lebanon and of progress on President Reagan's peace initiative. Even if further hostilities are avoided temporarily, the Soviet move will probably restore Syria's confidence in its ability to withstand an Israeli attack, which will hinder the achievement of Lebanese and Arab-Israeli peace settlements. [REDACTED]

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By introducing SA-5 units to Syria, Moscow is putting its prestige more on the line in the Middle East than at any time since its deployment of air and air defense units to Egypt in 1970. It is signaling Israel, just as it did then, that an attack on the USSR's ally could very well result in an engagement with Soviet forces. This, in turn, would greatly increase the risks of a US-Soviet confrontation in the region. If Israel accepted the Soviet challenge and was successful, the Soviets would be put in the position of either escalating their military presence or suffering a humiliating defeat. [REDACTED]

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Moscow's move suggests that it will demand a larger voice in Syria's military strategy. [REDACTED] the Soviets hold the Syrian military leadership--and Syrian forces in general--in very low regard. Given this view, the Soviets probably would not be willing to risk their own personnel and military prestige on a poorly conceived or adventuristic Syrian operation. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] we believe that a prerequisite to the deployment of the SA-5 units was greater Soviet involvement at the highest level of the Syrian military establishment. Substantial risks will remain, however, no matter what assurances the Soviets receive. If Syria becomes involved in a battle with the Israelis for whatever reason, the Soviets could hardly refuse to allow the SA-5s to be used and expect to maintain their credibility. [REDACTED]

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Next 2 Page(s) In Document Denied